Gender Issues and Social Science Education – An Interim Report

Contents

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1. Are gender issues still relevant for social studies?

Gender issues are no longer as contentious as they once were. Today, those who make the case for gender equality and equal opportunities usually find that they are pushing at open doors. Armed with new-found self-assurance, today's young women assert their right to self-determination, demand unrestricted access to all domains of public life, and take it for granted that opportunities will be distributed equally in life. Gender arrangements based on female subordination and male domination no longer hold much attraction for young men, either. The equality of the sexes is a broadly accepted norm. Most formerly male-dominated fields have been opened to women. Girls' success in the world of education is a case in point – girls have not only caught up with boys, females now tend to outperform males on measures of educational achievement and are, on the whole, better qualified.

Does this mean that the gender question now has to be reformulated? Or does the real or apparent levelling out of gender relations mean that the gender perspective has become obsolete in social science education and didactics[i] before it was ever properly established there? In this article, we give an interim report and discuss the relevance of gender in three respects. We explore the significance of gender-specific political attitudes and learning factors, analyse the curricular challenges involved in incorporating the gender perspective, and consider the potential of gender issues for introducing innovative new approaches to the didactics of social science – in interaction with the reference disciplines and didactic discourse. First, however, we outline those dimensions of gender that we consider to be relevant for social science education and didactics.

2. Relevant dimensions of gender

The *gender order*, the relations between men and women in society, describes the division of labour and balance of power between the sexes, and the associated rights, obligations and privileges. The concept of *gender as a structural category* reflects the fact that the differential social positioning of men and women runs the dividing line of "gender". The social stratification of society and the associated disparities are also governed by gender (see Cyba in this volume), making the gender order a basic structure of society. It has been hierarchically structured since the dawn of the modern age, and goes hand in hand with the *social construction of gender differences*. These, in turn, formed the basis for the complementary allocation of the sexes to different domains of life, with women being excluded and marginalized as the other, lesser sex. The social basic structure of the gender order has far-reaching effects, encroaching on individual lifestyles and identities. *Cultural symbolisations of femininity and masculinity* provide points of reference guiding the behaviour of individual men and women and serve as a foil to individual *life models and ways of life*. The gender order is not simply a social given, however; it is also subject to political regulation. This brings us to *gender politics*, which impacts directly or indirectly on the gender order in diverse domains of life – from family policy to labour market policy, social policy to equal rights policy – with considerable impact on those concerned and gendered effects on opportunities for participation and self-determination. This overview of the different dimensions of gender also gives an indication of the levels at which gender issues can be made the *subject* of social science education. It also suggests that gender – as a key element of individual self-images and subjective life models – is relevant for *learning factors and processes of interaction and communication* in social science instruction as well as for *teachers' social patterns of interpretation*.

3. Political attitudes, preferred topics, and communication structures in social studies – does gender matter?

Gender-specific learning factors and needs have been a topic of discussion for some time now, and have prompted reflection among experts in the didactics of various subjects (Hoppe, Kampshoff, Nyssen 2001). In politics education, it was not until the 1990s that these aspects began to be discussed, and only in the past few years that they became a subject of empirical study (Kroll 2001; Boeser 2002). The response to the findings of large-scale and international comparative research on young people's political attitudes and willingness to engage in civic activities is particularly important in this context. Detailed insights into gender effects can cast light on the potential outcomes of social science education in schools and, at the same time, help to explain the distinguishing characteristics of male and female students.

In contrast to studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, the IEA Civic Education Study, which surveyed the civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement of 14-year-old students in 28 countries in 1999, concluded that gender differences in civic content knowledge[ii] and skills in interpreting political communication no longer exist.[iii] The gender gap in political interest and the expected participation in political activities is also narrowing; females even express a greater willingness than males to vote in about one-fifth of the countries (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Likewise, in contrast to her 1986 findings, Hahn (1998) no longer found gender differences in political attitudes such as interest, efficacy, trust and confidence in her 1993 cross-national study. She did, however, detect lower

support for women's political rights among young males. In his analysis of the German data from the Civic Education Study, Oesterreich found the largest gender differences in attitudes to the equality of women and the image of the family. One-third of the male respondents were sceptical about women in politics, especially in top positions, and had a much more traditional image of the family (Oesterreich 2002). The 2002 Shell Study (Shell 2002) also found gender differences in the political attitudes of young people. A greater proportion of young males than females was "open to political participation", there were barely any gender differences among those "critical of politics", and a substantially higher share of females than males was found to be "disinterested". It would seem reasonable to interpret these findings as confirming that woman are less concerned with politics. However, the authors of the Shell Study point out that the self-reports on which this typology is based may have more to do with "doing gender" than with young people's personality attributes (ibid. 217). Overall, German and international comparative studies show that the gender gap is closing in some domains – primarily in political knowledge, but also in some political attitudes – but that gender differences persist in others – e.g., civic engagement and trust in political institutions. The compatibility of these findings with the assumption that girls are less interested in politics is limited. If, like Oesterreich, we assume that social engagement in adolescence is a preliminary form of democratic political activity, we have to regard girls as "more democratically oriented than boys" (Oesterreich 2002, own translation).

Recent studies on gender-specific structures of communication and interaction in civic education and social studies classrooms have also drawn very differentiated conclusions on the implications of gender differences. Whereas Kroll discerns significant gender differences in communication and interaction (Kroll 2001, 247), Boeser was only able to substantiate some of the traditional assumptions about gendered needs and learning factors in politics education (Boeser 2002). In line with the traditional assumption that girls and women are less concerned with politics, Boeser detected the main gender-specific differences in the domain of political interest and subjective attributions of competence. However, he could not confirm the hypothesised gender differences in other domains – young people of both sexes are more open to forms of civic engagement unrelated to political parties than to participating within the party system; females express a much greater willingness than males to engage in such non-party activities, and even their willingness to participate within parties was slightly higher than that of their male counterparts. Boeser did not find significant gender differences in students' preferences for particular social studies topics. He interprets this as meaning that the choice of the curricular topics covered in class is "evidently not relevant to gender-fair education" (Boeser 2002, 254, own translation). However, these findings contrast with those of earlier studies showing that female students express more interest in sociological topics (Weißeno 1989; Reinhardt 1996) and consider lessons covering sociological issues to have better overall effects than those concentrating on political science. Considering the spectrum of topics covered in Boeser's study – he focused exclusively on political science, using a comparatively narrow definition of politics – his conclusions seem to be rather hasty. In our opinion, the findings that female students tend to be less interested in the topics of social studies and would welcome more accessible instruction in the subject not only indicate gender-specific needs with respect to instructional design, as assumed by Boeser, but also with respect to the topics covered in social studies lessons.

Based on the findings of a qualitative study, Kroll also concludes that, although there are significant differences in the communication and interaction of male and female students, these are largely independent of the topic of instruction. According to Kroll, it

is not easy to pinpoint why females are often more passive than males in civic education, although well-intentioned teachers do their best to “teach politics in such a way that male and female students feel equally targeted” (Kroll 2001, 20, own translation). Only a very thorough analysis of individual sequences of instruction reveals how, despite teachers’ best intentions to the contrary, instructional settings can imperceptibly take root, the categories and methods of which exclude and silence female students by classifying their perspectives as unpolitical and constructing politics as masculine. Kroll’s conclusion that girls do not prefer topics related to their everyday life is not convincing, however. After all, her interpretation of instructional sequences shows that the classroom approach to precisely those topics most closely related to the life world of girls and women (three of the four examples deal with Paragraph 218, the section of the criminal code concerning abortion) is such that female students are forced into a communicative corner where they are bound to lose. It is hardly surprising that the silent majority of female students are not motivated to take a more active part in the lesson. Kroll’s findings that experiential learning, if implemented without an awareness of gender-specific differences in student communication and interaction, is particularly likely to lead to blatant discrimination of girls and young women in the classroom is especially disturbing. It raises the question of whether initial and in-service training for teachers can successfully instil the necessary awareness and willingness to reflect on one’s own gender-specific patterns of interpretation (Dillabough, Arnot 2000).

This review of recent studies on young people’s political attitudes and summary of findings from empirical instructional research makes two things clear. On the one hand, the gender gap in the political attitudes and knowledge of male and female students seems to be closing, and those who continue to assume the existence of gender differences in this domain may (unintentionally) help to perpetuate the gender gap. On the other hand, however, investigating gender-specific structures of communication and interaction remains a useful heuristic that sheds light on the subtleties of how students approach and process the topics of social science instruction. However, these kinds of analyses also show that gender issues are not just a topic like any other in social science education. They are more closely tied up with the social and personal identity of teachers and students than other areas of social inequality and they touch on areas that generally remain inaccessible to the analytical approach. From the perspective of the sociology of gender, Meuser (2000) has drawn attention to young men’s specific reservations about and resistance to gender issues. For girls, too, however, gender issues are unattractive when reduced to questions of inequality and discrimination. This kind of approach collides with the public rhetoric of equality and with the self-image of the younger generation of women, who consider themselves far better off than their predecessors in terms of gender equality (Geissler, Oechsle 2000).

The particular risks and, in some cases, unintended side-effects[iv] of covering gender issues in social science education highlight the general didactic and methodological problems of exploring normative and identity-related topics in the classroom. Tackling these difficulties using the example of gender issues might help bridge the enduring gap between the “microcosm of one’s own life” and the “macrocosm of global key issues” (Henkenborg 2000, own translation). *Questions relating to individual lifestyles*, in terms of both labour force participation and the organisation of the private sphere (see Leccardi in this volume), are more topical than ever for the younger generation, and are becoming increasingly challenging. The problems involved always relate directly or indirectly to aspects of the gender order and can only be properly addressed in this context.

4. The curricular challenge: Gender issues rather than women's issues

Assuming that, as outlined above, gender is indeed a basic structure of modern societies and that the ongoing processes of modernisation are also impacting on the gender order, then knowledge of the genesis, characteristics and current developments of this order and its cultural symbolisations can be considered a vital part of social science education. The same goes for insights into the aims and effects of political regulation of the gender order, and reflection on actors' subjective attitudes. However, this kind of social science analysis of gender issues has thus far played only a minor role in civic education and social studies in terms of either content or methods. Gender issues are generally addressed as women's issues; they are rarely framed in terms of structural theory, but usually seen from the perspective of socialisation theory, meaning that the analytical approach to social conditions is often limited to criticism of traditional role stereotypes. In the 1990s, this focus on the "role of women" was broadened to cover "gender roles". Typical topics are women and work, family and the division of labour, gender roles, equal opportunities, and less frequently political participation and the history of the women's movement. For the most part, these topics are covered in the domain of society; gender issues do not seem to be considered relevant to the domain of politics and economics – or, at least, such was the situation in the late 1990s (Oechsle 2000).

A new generation of textbooks for social science at upper secondary level has since emerged and we take this opportunity to investigate the relevance of gender issues in these new schoolbooks. Has the spectrum of topics covered been broadened, are gender issues now also discussed within the domains of politics and economics, what kind of theoretical approach is taken to the subject? We draw on teaching materials approved in North Rhine-Westphalia in accordance with the state's 1999 guidelines for upper secondary level education. The teaching objectives and content set forth in these guidelines were inspired by "signs of the times" and "developmental trends" which do not include gender. All dimensions and categories relating to goals, content areas, instructional design and the organisation of learning are formulated in gender-neutral terms. While numerous factors impacting on social status and life chances – e.g., education, occupation, income, political influence, health and criminality – are listed in some detail, *gender* as a social structure category is still disregarded.

Some of the newer textbooks are also characterised by the marginality of gender as a relevant category in social science education. In accordance with the North Rhine-Westphalia guidelines, the *Sozialwissenschaften* series published by Schöningh, which was revised completely at the end of the 1990s and is used extensively in schools, does not make explicit reference to gender issues, the only exceptions being "machismo" and the discrimination of women in developing countries. Likewise, in the two volumes of *Dialog SoWi*, which succeed in developing a complex and integrated methodological approach, gender issues are conspicuous by their absence. With a few exceptions in the topic domains of social inequality, the analysis of the gender order does not feature in the fields of either politics or economics and economic policy, even when the focus is on social change and globalisation. In *Kursthemen Sozialwissenschaften*, published by Cornelsen, in contrast, although the introductory volume for grade 11 economics, politics and society still takes a socialisation-theory perspective, the volumes on globalisation and social change consider the structural and institutional side of the gender order, providing a wealth of material and a strong set of conceptual tools.

Likewise, the *Sowi-Welt* series published by Diesterweg pays more attention to gender issues. A whole chapter is devoted to the gender order in the volume on societal structures and social change; however, gender aspects are only addressed sporadically in the volume on political structures and processes and that on individuals, groups and institutions.

The impression that emerges from this brief excursion into the new generation of social science textbooks is somewhat ambivalent. Whereas two of the series succeed in integrating gender either as a topic in its own right or as a cross-sectional category, the other two do not improve on the teaching materials of the 1990s and, to some extent, represent a step back. In particular, the persistent deficits in the domains of politics and economics show that there is no question of gender (yet) having been properly integrated as a cross-sectional category. This would not only imply a broadening of the content covered in the educational canon, but also a new approach to the classic subjects and questions of social science education. This kind of *gender mainstreaming in the curriculum* would introduce new aspects and dimensions to all domains of social science education – including the recognised and statistically substantiated gender differences in political participation and representation, the inequality of the sexes in working life, the family division of labour and the imbalances of power in married life, the biographies of men and women, the gendered effects of political transformation processes, globalisation and the associated evolution of new inequalities, even among women (see Young in this volume), and especially the regulation of the gender order by means of welfare state policies. Even now, this kind of understanding of gender as a cross-sectional category is found in very few politics and economics textbooks, and there is no systematic assessment of gender aspects. Instead, the focus remains on a genderless *homo oeconomicus* and male citizen who seems to be immune to the gender effects of social, economic and political change. This persistent marginality of gender at the curricular level reflects the fact that the reference disciplines of social science education are still hesitant to integrate women's and gender studies.

5. Marginality of the gender perspective – The interplay between science and didactics

As an independent academic discipline bridging educational science and the social sciences themselves, the didactics of social science education is particularly dependent on, and sculpted by, transdisciplinary co-operation between the individual disciplines. There are marked differences in the reception of women's and gender studies in the three central reference disciplines of political science, sociology and economics, with corresponding effects on the approach to gender in the respective didactics.

Political science, the dominant reference discipline for civic education, has remained immunised against feminist perspectives for longer than other social sciences, and this "time lag" (Kreisky, Sauer 1997) in the discipline's response to women's and gender studies has, in turn, had a lasting effect on civic education. Although there was a certain institutional opening of political science to women's and gender studies in the 1990s, gender issues have remained marginal in the mainstream of political science (Sauer 2003), and the potential of feminist political science for advancing social science education has scarcely been tapped. This potential applies to the topics of political participation, the conceptualisation of politics, and the citizenship debate (see Arnot in this volume), in particular. In political participation research, feminist perspectives have

led to the concept of political participation being broadened, unconventional forms of political engagement among men and women being explored, and the myth of women as nonpolitical being corrected. Potential for the didactics for social science education could also be provided by the feminist reconceptualisation of politics. The controversy that broke out long ago over the demarcations between a public/political sphere and a private sphere considered not to be political (Kreisky, Sauer 1997) – i.e., a narrowly or broadly defined concept of politics – runs into diagnoses concerning the changing face of politics. This controversy is not about lifting the barriers between the private and public/political domains, however, and it is certainly not about the occupation and colonisation of a protected private sphere, as is often falsely assumed of feminist theory. Rather, it is a question of analysing the demarcations between the public and the private sphere and exploring the political and societal regulation of private matters (Berghahn 2000).

Economic science, especially macro- and business economics, is considered to be a subdomain of social science "in which little, if any, effort has been made to address gender-specific questions or analyse the gender order" (Maier 2002, 401, own translation). The "gender blindness" of economics has to do with the central paradigms of economic theory: the exclusive focus on the analysis of market processes, the conceptualisation of *homo oeconomicus* as free of attributes such as gender, region or time, and the allocation of women to domestic labour. "Gender issues continue to be excluded from mainstream macroeconomic theory and empiricism to this day" (ibid. 402). For some time now, however, topics relating to women and gender have been considered in some subdomains such as population economics, family economics, labour market economics and welfare state analysis; empirical research on the subject has become established in the domains of labour market and social policy, in particular (see also Maier, Fiedler 2002). In business economics as well, gender-related approaches are limited to a few isolated areas, mainly in the fields of personnel management and organisation studies, with a relatively lively interest in women in management positions (see Maier 2002 for a summary). Thus, although there is certainly a fund of gender-related theoretical concepts and empirical findings in economic science, they barely feature in the available textbooks and guidelines, despite the fact that they would provide a wealth of opportunities for linking the life-worlds of the students to their work in the classroom.

Women's and gender studies became established in *sociology* earlier than in political or economic science. The integration of gender prompted an empirically and theoretically rewarding exploration of different societal domains, which has in turn cast new light on key concepts and research questions in some parts of the mainstream. Women's and gender studies has led to a broader understanding of social inequality (Gottschall 2001), for example, and the consideration of the double socialisation of women in employment and family life has led to a broader and more differentiated understanding of the category "work". The concepts and research questions of family sociology and the sociology of social policy have also benefited from the inclusion of the gender perspective. There seems to be an increasing realisation in some sections of the sociological mainstream, at least, that gender is a basic structure of modern societies and that any analysis of the ongoing modernisation processes will not be complete unless the gender order and changes in gender relations are taken into account (for example Castells 2002). Doubtless, this failure to tap into the potential of sociological (gender) topics can also be attributed to the fact that – apart from a few isolated efforts – there have, as yet, been few attempts to elaborate the didactics of sociology (Lamnek 1997).

6. Future perspectives

Although the “lasting invisibility of gender” in civic education (Henkenborg 2000, own translation) has run its term, the potential of women’s and gender studies to provide new impetus in broad domains of social science education does not yet seem to be exhausted. On the conceptual level, gender orientation has begun to be spelled out as a didactic principle (Richter 2000). Developments in the field of instructional research, where gender-specific learning factors and structures of communication and interaction have been explored in empirical studies, are also worthy of note. In our opinion, however, systematic research into the relations between learning content, methods and factors is still wanting, especially for the purposes of gender-fair instruction. There is a need for considerable further research here. At the curricular level, there is still much to be done in terms of integrating gender issues into the curricula and teaching material from the social sciences. Henkenborg (2000) draws attention to the potential of feminist political science for reviewing the core categories of civic education. He attributes particular importance to tackling normative questions, criticising power relations, and broadening the definition of politics. We also see potential for epistemological innovation in terms of the constructivist approach that gender studies takes to gender, and in its self-reflective and interdisciplinary nature (see Hark 2003), which is of course particularly relevant for social science education. It will only be possible to improve the integration of the category “gender” at the curricular level if the empirical and theoretical products of women’s and gender studies are given much more careful consideration in the individual reference disciplines of social science education.

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Notes

[i] As yet, an integrative didactics of social science has largely remained a desideratum; differentiated specialist didactics have, to date, only been developed for politics education and, to some extent, economics education.

[ii] In a regression model, however, when other factors are held constant, female students "have slightly lower civic knowledge than do males in about one-third of the countries" (Torney-Purta et al. 2001, 146).

[iii] Oesterreich (2002) surmises that this result can be attributed to the fact that the questions tapping political knowledge in the 1999 study were based on a broader understanding of politics than in the first IEA study, and were thus more in line with girls' attitudes and interests.

[iv] See Benard and Schlaffer's analysis of an instructional unit on the topic of gender roles that shows how – despite the teachers' good intentions – approaches that fail to consider gender issues simply lead to the reproduction of gender stereotypes.